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*Function and Meaning  
in Classic Maya Architecture*

*Stephen D. Houston, Editor*

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FUNCTION AND MEANING  
IN CLASSIC MAYA ARCHITECTURE

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A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks  
7th and 8th october 1994

Stephen D. Houston, *Editor*

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## *Preface*

Cut and dressed stone architecture holds a special fascination for those interested in ancient civilizations. Without it, one would not be able to visit “the ruins” the same way as when one walks through remnants of halls that once echoed with ancient chants or laughter. Architectural remains serve to gauge the relative importance of a place and its former inhabitants within the larger world in which they existed. Ruins also provide a special sense of place for visitors, just as the same functioning buildings once created a distinct experiential presence for those who built and used them. In the last century, both romantics and scientists gave importance to ruins, leading, on the one hand, to the construction of “follies” and the like, to create evocative places, while large-scale architecture, in particular, served as a key emblem of advanced civilization in theories of cultural evolution.

The special powers of architecture to evoke a romantic nostalgia for a lost world in which one has not participated, but which might be imagined or scientifically resurrected, have had a significant role in Maya studies. It was largely through the art of Frederick Catherwood that the attention of the Euro-American world was drawn to the “lost cities” of the Maya; his depictions were at once highly accurate in their rendering and romantic in their presentation of exotic architecture amidst tropical vegetation. A century later, Tatiana Proskouriakoff’s *Album of Maya Architecture* stimulated the public and scholars alike to imagine ancient America and to investigate its past. Then, however, the goal was to retrieve the ancient Maya with the rigor of accurate recording and field investigations, though the lure of the exotic was perhaps just as enticing to Proskouriakoff’s generation.

Investigations of Maya architecture have been among the chief vehicles for contemplating a great art tradition, the hieroglyphic writing system, and evaluating issues of comparative sociology. The powerful attraction of Maya architecture as an evocation of lost worlds, as a medium for the carved glyph and idol, and as a yardstick for measuring evolutionary complexity, makes it appro-

## *Preface*

appropriate that attention be given to the buildings themselves, rather than simply treating them as media for the investigation of other issues, as valuable as these might be. The articles in this volume are of special value and importance in making architecture itself the focus of attention. At the same time that they give appropriate attention to the great architectural achievements of the Maya, they do not ignore the often evanescent residences of commoners. Rather than privileging cross-cultural comparisons or the anthropology of prehistoric peoples, however, structures remain at the forefront. In this, we reaffirm Maya architecture as one of the world's great building traditions, allow for meaningful interdisciplinary exchange between archaeology, art history, and anthropology, and provide new ways of appreciating Maya culture, from a unique perspective.

"Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture," the symposium from which this book is derived, was held at Dumbarton Oaks in October 1994. At that time, Elizabeth Boone was director of Pre-Columbian Studies, and to her and Richard Diehl, former acting director of the program, goes credit for working so well and productively with Stephen Houston. It has been my great pleasure to learn from them and to assist Stephen in the latter stages of transforming the symposium papers into this volume.

The contributions presented here will surely mark a significant stage in the study of Maya architecture and the society that built it. These articles represent the advances that have been achieved in our understandings of the past, point toward avenues for further studies, and note the distance we have yet to travel in fully appreciating and understanding this ancient American culture and its material remains.

Jeffrey Quilter  
Dumbarton Oaks

## *Introduction*

STEPHEN D. HOUSTON  
brigham young university

Ideally, every edited book should have its inception in a sense that certain connections need to be made, that gaps still open need to be filled. This volume represents a collective attempt by Mayanists to establish such connections and to close such gaps. *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture* results from a meeting, held at Dumbarton Oaks on October 7 and 8, 1994, that confronted a growing problem in our research. As Mayanists, we draw upon an extraordinary accumulation of data. Few architectural traditions are as abundantly documented as the legacy of buildings left by the Classic Maya, whose immense palaces and platforms, pyramids and plazuelas amaze tourists and overwhelm archaeologists. For all the richness of information, however, there is much that is poorly understood. Why were these buildings constructed? How were they made, how were they used, and how were they regarded or perceived? What meanings did the Classic Maya attach to such structures? How did these meanings change, and why?

There are good reasons why such questions remain unanswered or only partly addressed by recent scholarship. Consider this: A compelling, internal logic commands the technical exercise of excavating architecture. Once started, excavations must undertake the tedious process of finding corners, moldings, and abutments; of attesting to changes in material and method of construction; and of documenting modifications over time through sections, plans, and projections. Most of us do not believe in shortcuts to understanding buried architecture. Some scholars may even question the whole enterprise of digging such buildings. Arguably, such work squanders thin resources of labor and money or, in a more ideological vein, expresses an elite-focused, Mayanist obsession with monumentality. The contributors to this volume would probably concur only slightly with these two points of view, perhaps rather less with the first than

with the second. In my own opinion, reliance on test pits and surface survey produces marginal and inconclusive results in understanding structures. If buildings are to be studied and excavated, they must be uncovered properly and extensively, although the economic and political costs may be great.

But an unfortunate side effect attends this concentration of effort, thought, and money. Through its very difficulty, through the exigent demands it makes on research, documentation of architecture often becomes a conclusion rather than a beginning. This it should never be. I believe we must turn forcefully to the questions listed before, going beyond simple description to an assault on vexatious problems of meaning, function, and development. Our spirit must be interdisciplinary and impervious to intellectual parochialism. To paraphrase Mao, may a thousand flowers bloom, a thousand approaches, a thousand varieties of archaeology be brought to bear, without one excluding another.

This volume has another dimension. It can hardly have escaped notice—in fact, it presses on me every day as a student of Maya writing—that the Classic period also represents a time of historical record. This book not only confronts basic issues of function and meaning in buildings it also injects the detailed information that epigraphy now provides (see Stuart). In so doing, it explores the role of tradition in relation to individual needs and personalities (see Fash), sorts out native categories and their correspondences (or incongruities) with real buildings (Houston), and reconstructs aspects of architectural ritual, mythological background, and building function (see McAnany, Miller, Taube, and Schele).

What we cannot do, both for want of time and because we wish to avoid diffusion of focus, is to construe aspects of Classic Maya city planning, of how buildings fit into a larger landscape. Nor can we concentrate to any great extent on small-scale, domestic architecture, although Kevin Johnston and Nancy Gonlin help remedy this deficiency with their substantive and methodological essay. (Wendy Ashmore presented a similar paper at our fall meeting, but, under press of other commitments, found it necessary to withdraw her thoughtful discussion from this volume.) We lack a comprehensive review of all regions in the Maya lowlands and, worse, fail to include an architect or engineer's view of the technical restraints and possibilities that inform Maya architecture (although see Abrams). I personally regret that scheduling problems made it impossible for some of our fine Latin American colleagues to participate. So, despite our good intentions, the selection of topics and authors will appear to some—only a few I trust—as idiosyncratic and patchwork. At the least, the lacunae in this book will prompt the preparation of other volumes. My concluding essay points

to productive areas of future research and suggests how Mayanists can participate in a wider, transregional dialogue on architecture.

The papers fall into three sections, all of which use “function” and “meaning” in the sense of “building use” and “indigenous perception of significance.” To further their analysis, Johnston and Gonlin also employ a broader, more “etic” definition of these terms. The first section of the book provides orientation and background. David Webster’s essay serves as the “prow of this boat” (although he may prefer some other, possibly sacrificial metaphor to describe his role). His acute observations make superfluous any windy, editorial introduction. In this first section, authors also address the antecedents of Classic architecture (Hansen) as well as its method of construction (Abrams) and correspondence with the “vernacular” tradition, if that is quite the right descriptor for it ( Johnston and Gonlin). The following section focuses more closely on the historical setting of Classic architecture, including questions of patronage and design, and thematic concerns in monumental construction (Miller, Fash, and McAnany), including the matter of what goes *into* buildings (Chase and Chase). The final block of papers treats iconography and epigraphy. Here we approach a true cognitive archaeology that is, in my view, more solid and convincing than recent Europeanist efforts in this direction. The wealth of evidence and depth of reasoning deflect any accusation that this book on architecture simply responds to “a fashionable topic of theoretical discourse” ( Johnson 1995: 644). For some time Mayanists have thought carefully about this topic and, with appropriate enrichment from anthropology and other disciplines (e.g., Steadman 1996), will do so for years to come. Our sincere desire is that this collection of essays will stimulate and provoke readers into exploring, from their own perspective, the complexities of “Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture.”

*Acknowledgments* The editor of a Dumbarton Oaks volume incurs many debts. *Function and Meaning* has coherence and flow because Elizabeth Boone and Richard Diehl, director and former acting director, respectively, of Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, shared with me their good sense about the practical organization of edited volumes. The current director, Jeffrey Quilter, facilitated the final preparation of the book. I must also acknowledge the great generosity of the senior fellows, who, in something of a departure from precedent, allowed me to organize, from June to August of 1994, an academic summer camp on the topic of the symposium that generated this publication. At Dumbarton Oaks, Nancy Gonlin, Patricia McAnany, Karl Taube, David Webster,

and I not only had a rip-snorting time, but, more important, improved our minds with the unique fellowship that this institution offers. I learned a great deal from these friends and would be the poorer without their collegiality. This volume exists in part because of financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH grant RO-22648-93, Collaborative Projects, with David Stuart) and Dean Clayne Pope, College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, Brigham Young University. Of course, these generous sources bear no responsibility for the contents of this book, nor does John Clark of Brigham Young University, who contributed his editorial eye when it was needed. Finally, this book employs a system of glyphic transcription used to good effect in the Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing (Stuart 1988). Site names follow those listed by the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University (Graham 1975: 9, 23–24).

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